

**Joint Meeting of the Council of the Borough of Somerset  
And  
The Township of Somerset Supervisors**

**February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2018 5:00 p.m.**

**Joint Meeting Called to Order:**

*(a) Borough Council Meeting Called to Order – President Ruby Miller*

*(b) Somerset Township Supervisors Meeting Called to Order – Chairman Donald Miller.*

Somerset Township & Somerset Borough Joint Meeting was opened with recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag.

**Roll Call:**

*Borough Council Members present: Ruby Miller; Fred Rosemeyer; Judy Pyle; Pam Ream; Steve Shaulis; Gary Thomas and Sue Opp. Mayor Scott Walker also present.*

*Absent was Junior Council Member Maria Weimer.*

*Also present were the following: Borough Manager, Michele Enos; Director of Finance, Brett Peters; Chief of Police, Randy Cox; Solicitor James Cascio; and Consulting Engineers, Tom Reilly and Jake Bolby.*

**Roll Call:**

*Somerset Township Supervisors present: Dan Halverson; Donald Miller and Randy Beistel.*

**New Business:**

*(a) Act 172 of 2016 – Discussion concerning tax relief for volunteer firefighters and non-profit emergency medical service agencies.*

Solicitor Cascio stated that the joint meeting was a result of some conversations Somerset Township had been having with the Borough Manager, Ms. Enos, and the Finance Director, Mr. Peters. The conversation involved considering how, or whether, both Municipalities would want to approach the opportunity that is provided by Act 172 of 2016.

He stated that Act 172 of 2016 is an enactment of the PA Legislature, signed by the Governor. It provides an incentive for volunteer firefighters and emergency responders. It allows the Municipalities involved to grant real estate and earned income tax credits to

these individuals who volunteer. These individuals would have to meet certain criteria determined under statute.

Solicitor Cascio stated that since the Somerset Volunteer Fire Department serves both Municipalities, it made good sense that the Somerset Township Supervisors contacted Somerset Borough in approaching this issue correctly.

Solicitor Cascio stated that the thought was that if both Municipalities could have a joint meeting, we could gauge an understanding of each other's interests without a commitment. Then we could, perhaps, figure out a way that we can communicate and work together as the process goes forward. He stated that the thought would be to understand Act 172, discuss it together, and understand how the Municipalities would want to consider approaching it in some joint fashion.

Solicitor Cascio stated that the lawyers could designate two (2) contact persons, from the Borough and Township, who would work to get a clear understanding of the options and possibilities. Then these individuals could bring it back for consideration to the entire Council and Board of Supervisors. He stated that the idea would be to determine the interest, produce a process to discuss, then discover some way of approaching this opportunity in a way that the benefits and costs are understood by all.

Solicitor Cascio asked if everyone understood what the options are under Act 172, and if Borough Council had any questions as to how it works.

Solicitor Cascio stated that the Fire Chief would be the one who would be doing the certification and determining entitlement to the credit. He stated that the Council and Supervisors would have to find a solution as to how those credits could be determined and applied.

He stated that the process is to see what kind of interest there is in doing this, and if so, then to have a study on it so we could coordinate what each Municipality is doing.

Solicitor Cascio explained Act 172 in more detail. He stated that there is a Real Estate Tax Credit that could be granted. He stated the credit is up to 20% of the real estate state tax liability for residential property, owned and occupied, as the home of an active volunteer. Solicitor Cascio mentioned that millage rates of both Municipalities are different, so this is an area of concern that would need discussed.

He stated that earned income tax credit is a flat dollar amount. Solicitor Cascio stated that for a member of the Fire Company, or non-profit emergency medical service agency, to qualify for the tax credit, they would have to go through a process to determine qualification. In order to be qualified, in each case, you would have to be more than a member. Qualified members would have to have credits earned in their service as firefighters.

Solicitor Cascio mentioned that each Municipality would have separate Ordinances, which will need written up and passed, regarding all of this.

Mr. Thomas stated that the real estate tax credit was a good idea, but also voiced his concerns with it. He stated that many younger volunteers rent their homes and do not own property. He stated that we need something else to get these younger ones interested in volunteering. Mr. Thomas stated that there are hours of training involved to get them started as fire fighters. He stated that there has to be something else to draw them into volunteering.

Solicitor Cascio brought out that earned income tax is there for these renters, if it's drafted up in the Ordinances. He stated that there is all kind of different combinations. He stated the idea would be to have communication between the Borough and Township to air out questions, and make sure that everyone can think about it.

Mr. Thomas voiced concern, again, over the large amount of training hours involved in becoming a fire fighter. He encouraged all in attendance to write a letter to the legislators in this area, or the State, encouraging them to reduce the amount of training hours necessary to become a certified firefighter. He feels that the long training hours are deterring many from becoming firefighters.

Ms. Enos stated that the joint meeting this evening was about the interest in doing this, and also, how Council and the Supervisors want to proceed from here.

Solicitor Cascio recommended allowing himself and Solicitor Frantz to figure out how they can proceed in a way that is in compliance with the Open Meeting Law.

Also discussed was if other Municipalities are involved in Act 172, and what they do in this regard.

Captain Greg Urban, from the Somerset Borough Fire Department, spoke up. He stated that he'd like to encourage all to "think outside the box" of other ways to recruit individuals to be fire fighters.

He stated that lack of help in Volunteer Fire Departments is a nationwide problem. He mentioned that, through the years, the number of volunteers have dropped drastically. He stated that Somerset Borough Fire Department have approximately eight (8) "breathing apparatus individuals" that are regular attenders. They have approximately 14 or 15 volunteer fire fighters total.

Captain Urban stated that when the pager goes off, you go "from 0-100 mph", and that is what's killing fire fighters across the state.

He stated that the present volunteers are getting older. He also mentioned that line-of-duty deaths are common, which are mostly from heart attacks.

Captain Urban stated that they are looking at various ways to try to recruit younger individuals.

He stated that consolidation of these small departments always comes up as a way to save money. Captain Urban stated that consolidation isn't going to work, because that's a money factor, not a personnel issue.

He spoke about a few dangerous car accidents that recently occurred. He mentioned that there was not enough of volunteers or experienced volunteers at the scenes. He stated that this was a scary situation. Captain Urban stated that this is a big problem.

Ultimately, he suggested, that a paid Fire Department would help solve the shortage in volunteers.

Discussion was held between the Borough and Township regarding problems they are each facing with recruitment, individual recruits who "come and go", and the aging volunteers that are unable to fight fires anymore.

Also discussed was a training program that the Borough attempted to get started with Vo-Tech School. This attempt was unable to be followed through with Vo-Tech, because the State was unwilling to fund the program.

## **ADJOURNMENT**

### **(a) Somerset Borough Council Meeting Adjournment**

#### **Motion**

Mr. Thomas moved to adjourn, motion seconded by Mrs. Opp.

Motion Unanimously Carried.

### **(b) Somerset Township Supervisors Meeting Adjournment**

#### **Motion**

Mr. Halverson moved to adjourn, motion seconded by Mr. Beistel.

Motion Unanimously Carried.

5:30 p.m.

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Michele A. Enos, Borough Secretary